

Running to Win Knowing how to Heal

By Dr. Gregory Wiens

One thing a runner eventually learns is to discern between the pain of progress and the pain of an injury. As I wrote a few weeks ago, there is a big difference between these two kinds of pain. If it is the pain of progress, then you must learn to push through the pain by enlisting the help of others, accountability, and staying motivated through measuring your progress. As you do this, you notice that your performance actually improves. However, if you are injured, over time the pain actually decreases your ability to perform. Injuries are set backs that must be dealt with appropriately.

Last year I was running up a valley between two mountains in Bend Oregon. It was a cold but refreshing and invigorating run. I ran through the snow and mud with great zest as I ran up the gorge a couple of miles. Then I crossed over a rushing river on a footbridge and began running down the other side. I quickly noticed the other side of the gorge was coated with a sheet of melting ice. I fell and scraped up my legs as I slid down the side of the mountain.

Undaunted, I got up and started running down the gorge, but the ice continued all the way down. By the time I reached the bottom, I had fallen FOUR times! On the last fall I actually damaged my rotator cuff through a very intense fall on my outstretched arm and slid over roots and rocks until I finally came to rest against a tree. I could barely walk because of injuries to my arms, shoulder, legs and buttocks! You may wonder why I kept going. Well, that is the question Mary Kay asked me, and only a runner knows the answer for sure. With the adrenaline flowing, you simply keep going ignoring obvious signs that you should consider stopping.

Now, after having spent several thousand dollars on medical bills and a great number of sleepless nights in pain, I have learned two things from that memorable February 2008 run. The first is to check both sides of a gorge before you run up two miles! The other lesson I learned is that there is a time to quit a run and walk in order not to cause further harm.

In ministry I see this truth so often demonstrated. I recently talked with a young man about a potential pastoral position. After much prayer and discussion, he told me that he felt his marriage needed more work before he could take such a step. I applauded this young man's wisdom...he was checking both sides of the gorge before he headed up. If God calls a man or woman into ministry, then he calls the spouse. We must count the cost before we begin. Jesus challenges us in Luke, when he talks about the farmer who wouldn't build the barn or the military commander engaging in battle, unless they counted the cost. Pastoral Ministry IS NOT for everyone, and there are many costs to be counted: personal, financial, emotional, family and time to name a few.

The second lesson I learned in that valley that day in February was to know when it is time to walk and seek healing. I see too many men and women in ministry who refuse to admit they're injured. They think they must just tough it out and keep going. And in so doing, they cause deeper injuries, which take years to heal. If they would instead take time out for healing they would be better equipped to finish well. If we are to finish well like Paul encourages us to, we must realize that we are in a long distance race, not a sprint. So the goal is to remain healthy for the long term, which requires us to admit when we are injured and need to take some time to heal. Believe me, at my age I am always between injuries. And I now realize that for me to finish well means I need to be aware of what is hurting and how it can be remedied.

Why don't we recognize or at least admit that we are hurt? For me on the side of that mountain it had something to do with adrenaline and ego. The adrenaline kept me from feeling the full pain of the injury, and my ego kept me going, not wanting to admit I couldn't handle it. I think these two factors influence us in ministry as well.

Let's face it; ministry can be an adrenaline rush. We are in front of people delivering the Word and speaking for God. Our schedules become hectic and we run from one appointment to another, kind of like a fireman. We bring wisdom and solutions to each situation that we meet. There is always some crises we need to attend

to, or a meeting where a critical decision is being made, which could impact the future effectiveness of the church. This hectic pace can produce a sort of adrenaline addiction. We confuse passion with a need for this adrenal rush.

This rapid rate of ministry can cause injuries...we begin to lack passion, we become weary and depressed or even start experiencing physical symptoms. Rather than admitting we are injured to our Board (the accountability people we talked about several weeks ago), we press on thinking this is just a temporary phase of ministry. We push and push trying to keep the pace, all the while creating a deeper and deeper injury.

Through my thirty years of ministry, I have seen far too many men and women commit ministry suicide through this type of injury. They keep such a pace until they eventually are so deeply wounded they burn out, fall out or morally check out. If only they had the insight to acknowledge their condition was not improving. If only they had someone in their life who could see their terminal condition before the end came. There have been several examples in my life when someone has had to tell me I was injured and I needed to quit the race because I couldn't see it through the adrenaline. This is one of the roles our accountability people should fill in our lives. The Elders of Florida Church of God Ministries do this for me. They have TOLD me to take vacations, bring in a consultant to help organize staff, as well as encouraged me to take a sabbatical. We all need someone in our life that can speak truth into our lives...for the Kingdom's sake.

The other reason we refuse to acknowledge our injuries is our egos. Our pride can keep us from admitting that we have taken too many hits in ministry or maybe one big hit. You have experienced this situation in your church. Someone will criticize your preaching, leading, decisions, looks, house, car, dog or cat! Whatever there is in your life someone will find a reason to criticize. It may be repeated little falls. Or maybe it is that big fall: when a staff member takes half of the church, a board member tries a coup, your kid drops off the deep end, or maybe your spouse tells you they have had enough.

We all experience deep injuries in ministry. Just like running, it is going to happen someday and in someway. The question is not if, but when? Is your ego strong enough to admit when you are hurt? Is your self-concept secure enough to say I can't keep going; I need some attention given to my pain? For me, it meant not running for four months, meeting with doctors, and rehabilitation! I would suggest that healing for ministry injuries could be just as time consuming, painful, expensive and disheartening. Injuries are seldom convenient.

I needed more than stop running; I needed professionals to help me heal. So do ministry injuries. At Florida Church of God Ministries' Resource Center, we count with Elton Hume, a trained therapist who has worked with probably 15% of the pastors in Florida. Elton is a wonderful coach to help you deal with your injuries. We also have other therapists around the state who are gifted in helping you.

Every runner expects to get injured but we still keep running. The same is true of ministry: we will all be injured at one time or another but we still keep serving our Lord. Let me simply remind you that it is okay to be hurt, it is not okay to keep going without acknowledging it. No matter what your adrenaline or your ego tells you, take a break and get the help and healing you need.